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Urban Wallpaper

Citation for published version:

Hoek, L 2016, 'Urban Wallpaper: Film Posters, City Walls and the Cinematic Public in South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 73-92.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1139029>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/00856401.2016.1139029](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2016.1139029)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies

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Film Posters on City Walls: the Cinematic Public in Urban South Asia

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What do film posters on city walls tell us about the relationship between the cinema and the city? In this paper I rely on the practice and perspective of young men who put up film posters onto Dhaka's city walls to explore this question. I argue that the wall is a key site for the production of a cinematic public that does not map onto film audiences; for the experience of newness in the city and of the cinema as analogous experiences; and for an encounter with imagery that is considered luminous and intense, afflicting the crowds that pass them by in the congested city.

Keywords: cinema, film posters, circulation, walls, cinematic public, crowd, newness, city, film audiences, Bangladesh.

Posters and Publics

The surfaces of Dhaka's streets are replete with film posters. They are so ubiquitous that you could easily miss the rapid turnover of these brightly coloured announcements. In fact, it wasn't until I started to work with the young men who cycle through the megacity at night affixing posters to its walls, that I realised exactly how quickly and constantly the Dhaka walls change. Posters that the *afficheurs* or *posterwallahs* put up one evening could have disappeared the next, encouraging

further rounds of poster work. Their labour continually remakes the city’s surfaces as they cover urban thoroughfares with vibrant announcements of the ‘next big thing’.

The work of the *posterwallah* is based on a straightforward premise with significant consequences: that the city wall is a medium for making the cinema public by means of film posters. From this premise, and the labour it incites, a relationship between the cinema and the city can be proposed that takes the city wall as its starting point. In this paper I reiterate the exchange between the cinematic and the urban noted by many scholars¹ from the vantage point of the intersection between film posters and Dhaka’s *walls*, those concrete structures that shape the very textures and movements around urban spaces. I will argue that the city wall in Dhaka is a medium for the presence of the cinema *per se*, instead of the announcement of particular film texts. That is, the wall provides the medium through which the city comes to be inhabited by and infused with the cinema in general, rather than merely being the site of publicity for *a* film in particular. Let me take the wall and the poster up in turn to frame the journey that will follow.

An omnipresent part of urban infrastructures, the wall has appeared in scholarship as a clear site of contemporary modes of segregation and the historical means to instituting colonial hierarchies of race, community and gender, even if walls’ apparent solidity has also been found to be chimerical.² The latter opens up the

¹ Such as in Nezar Al Sayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (London: Routledge, 2006); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans), (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002); Gyan Prakash (ed.), *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

² For example, see Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); William J. Glover, 2008, *Making Lahore Modern: constructing and imagining a colonial city* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘From Culture to Barbed Wire: On Houses and Walls in South Africa’ in *The Texas International Law Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 345 (2011), pp. 297-315; Stephen Legg, *Spaces of colonialism:*

possibility of the wall as a contested semiotic and material site. In the practice of Dhaka’s poster-pasters, the wall is continually renewed, papered over and revisioned, as their work stirs its surface.³ The concrete solidity of the wall is animated by *posterwallahs* to become a “thirdspace,”⁴ a hard structure of the “soft city.”⁵ It is in this city, come alive in the everyday practice of the *afficheur*, that the wall appears as a space for projection and a means of communication. Here the wall is a medium.

But the wall is not a ‘clean’ medium that disappears in favour of the colourful messages borne on its surface. Rather, it interferes with the poster in ways that I will suggest are central to how the wall functions as a medium for the cinema and produces a cinematic public. Following theorists of infrastructure and media,⁶ I will show that the wall is not an inert, passive or transparent medium. This is important because it is at this point that the wall shapes the messages from the film industry away from particularity (*this* film, on *that* date, in *this* theatre) to a greater generality (*cinema, now, here*).

The plentiful film posters on Dhaka’s walls underscore the need to consider a cinematic public that does not map onto film audiences. Especially in Bangladesh, but across South Asia, there is a disjunction between the presence of the cinema in the public sphere and the particularities of empirical audiences and specific films. Given the flourishing literature on the world- and self-making powers of the cinema in South

Delhi’s urban governmentalities (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); Setha Lowe, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000).

⁴ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

⁵ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974).

⁶ Nikhil Anand, ‘Pressure: The Polytechnics of Water Supply in Mumbai’, in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2011), pp. 542-563; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Asia,⁷ we need a means to account for a cinematic public that does not watch (many) films, especially as cinema is scattered far and wide into what Preminda Jacob, describing film banners and cut-outs in South India, calls “extra-cinematic space.”⁸ The film poster on the city wall speaks to the omnipresence of the film image in South Asia far beyond the discrete audience and particular viewers of *a* film. It points to the participation of the cinema in the domain of “mass publicity – the broader space in which the cinema breathes,”⁹ to its life beyond the film viewed on screen.

To understand the pull of the cinema, to the extent that it can create a public without a commitment to read its texts,¹⁰ the work of *posterwallahs* highlights the intersection of dense paths of urban circulation with the visual intensity and luminosity in cinematic imagery. Combined these produce a mode of urban viewing that allows even the reluctant or disinterested to be addressed by the cinema and constituted as its public. This is important, because it gives us a clue how in those parts of South Asia where films are considered by many to be ‘bad’, or ‘dirty’, unsophisticated, not aimed at them, not made properly, not watchable in suitable places or any of the other persuasive reasons why people turn away from films, how even in those places, cinema has the political, economic, cultural and emotional

⁷ This takes many forms, too abundant to all be cited. For example: Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Zakir Hossain Raju, *Bangladesh Cinema and National Identity: In Search of the Modern*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (eds.), *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, 2005, pp. 118-140; Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

⁸ Preminda Jacob, *Celluloid Deities: the Visual Culture of Cinema and Politics in South India* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), p. 3.

⁹ William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 2.

¹⁰ Cf. Michael Warner, ‘Publics and Counterpublics’, in *Public Culture* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2002), pp. 49-90.

resonance and importance that we have come to accord it based on the studies demonstrating the significance of cinema in South Asia.¹¹

To pursue these points, I will take you along a night-time ride through Dhaka city. This article is deliberately structured as a single night’s encounter. I aim to illustrate the impermanence of the city’s surfaces, the façades that move in rhythm with the city’s continually changing form. I want to emphasise the ‘superficial’ and the temporary nature of the city’s sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. Based on this single night, I present two storylines in this paper. In the first, I recount one night of poster-pasting with a crew in Dhaka on 8 April 2010. This story is marked by a symbol of a bicycle (🚲). This storyline has its own velocity. I recount our movements around the city by bicycle, presenting a form of mapping that Valentine shows can bring together different sites, people and practices, travelling at different speeds, that may not be united by other means of writing.¹² This storyline about transport shows ethnographically how images are ‘set before’ people. I, as ethnographer, move with the *posterwallahs*, at their pace, encountering the nighttime city and its inhabitants, as the *afficheurs* materialise the images from the film industry within the medium of the wall, waiting for the daytime crowds to move along them. It is an ethnographic account of circulation.

The second storyline, inspired by this single night, combines two sets of reflections. The first are of observations by Mohammad Rokon, *posterwallah* and tea-stall owner in Dhaka. “I know all of Dhaka,” Rokon told me. He had been putting up

¹¹ Amongst which, recently, Ali Nobil Ahmed, ‘Film and Cinephilia in Pakistan: Beyond Life and Death’ in *Bioscope* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2014): pp. 81-89; William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); M. Madhava Prasad, *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014); S.V. Srinivas, *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2013).

¹² David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 7.

posters onto the walls of Dhaka city since he was thirteen years old. Now twenty-nine, the business held no secrets for him and I relied on his reflections to get a better grasp of the *posterwallah*'s business. The second set of reflections is my own, combining theoretical concerns with my ongoing research into the film industry. Together these narratives make up three pairs of ethnographic-conceptual sections that map onto three points. The first point relates to the disjunction between the audience and the public of the cinema. The second describes how newness marks both the experience of the cinema and of the city. The third sets out a theory of urban viewing that combines visual intensity with circulatory density to account for the way in which the imagery of the cinema reaches out from its walls. Each of these sections indicates the entwining of the city and the cinematic in different ways, as walls fuse with posters, are continuously renewed, and produce dense sites for viewing the radiant imagery of the cinema.

Before we set off on our journey, a final word of caution: while the production and forms of the film posters are worth an extended discussion, in this article I am not primarily concerned with these aspects.¹³

Kakrail to Bangla Motor 🚲

The narrow street leading from Kakrail into Segunbagicha was crammed even at 10pm. Cars, rickshaws, and other vehicles were jammed between the Rajmoni cinema hall on one side of the street, and two tall office towers housing the production companies of the Bangladesh film industry on the other side. The financial heart of

¹³ The early history of the film poster in colonial India, as well as work on Tamil, Hindi and Pakistani cinema posters, can be read to think analogously about Bangladeshi film posters, much of whose story is similar. See Ali Khan, 'Pakistani Film Poster Art', in *BioScope* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2014): 183-190; Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002); Preminda Jacob, *Celluloid Deities*; Ranjani Mazumdar, 'The Bombay film poster', in *Seminar* No. 525 (2003) [<http://www.india-seminar.com>, accessed 1 Dec. 2015].

the industry, this narrow street was visited by production boys carrying stacks of film tins, cameramen trailed by director’s assistants, junior artists in their finery, and even the chauffeur driven stars of the Bangladeshi screen. Unlike many other roads in the city, this street always smelled vaguely sweet. The smells of the stuffed *puris* sold by street vendors outside the cinema hall blended with the fragrance of nighttime flowers drifting in from the gardens of government offices deeper inside Segunbagicha.

One of the office towers looked increasingly dilapidated. Tussles with the City Cooperation had left the building suspended between imminent demolition and forthcoming permissions to add further levels onto the building. Construction had started, as had demolition, leaving the film production building looking distinctly ragged. Like the national film industry itself, the building struggled between decay and potential. On the pavement beneath this conflicted tower, a fleet of transport tricycles had floated in. Young men sat smoking on the wooden platforms on the back wheels of these ‘*van-garis*’. Their cyclists hung over the steering, waiting.

The heavy thump of large bundles of film posters slapped onto the *vans* animated the group. These were five different designs of poster for the film *Khoj-The Search* (2010, Iftexhar Chowdhury dir.).¹⁴ Buckets were passed around and filled with water, while the men split up into groups, three per cycle. A short man in shirt-pant had come from the producer’s offices and oversaw the distribution of the posters and

¹⁴ The film *Khoj-The Search* flopped when it was released in April 2010 after a massive investment by the hero-producer of the film M.A. Jalil Ananta. An outsider to the film industry, Ananta made his fortune through garments factories. His first film did become a cult hit among young middle class Bangladeshis, who enthusiastically quoted Ananta’s heavily accented English, repeating ‘I am saarsing phor ma lubh!’ or renaming a fictional sequel ‘Paisi – The Found’. Subsequent films by Jalil have seen him become a phenomenon, combining an extraordinary star persona with unique films that appeal to both working class audiences in single screen halls and English medium educated multiplex viewers and have left critics dumbstruck. See Samia R. Karim, ‘The Bangu Also Rises,’ *Bdnews24*. (26 Sept. 2013), [<http://opinion.bdnews24.com>, accessed 26 Sept. 2013].

the small strips of printed text that would go over them announcing: “16 April, Auspicious Release - Across the whole country” [*Subhomukti – Saradesh Baypi*].

Names of city parks, markets, and roundabouts were called out as each *van* was assigned a different trajectory through the city. “We’ll take them,” signalled one of the young men pointing at us, “which way are you going?” “Monipuripara, Farmgate” replied Paul, my partner and photographer. The nighttime streets of Dhaka were considered even more unsafe for women than the daylight roads often proved to be, and thus I was accompanied. “They’ll go with me,” interrupted the short man who introduced himself as Ahsan, “I’m going through Farmgate.”

“Sit,” smiled Mithu, the young *van-wallah* resting on the handle bars of his cargo cycle. He had a long night of heavy cycling ahead of him. His burden had just increased with an anthropologist and a photographer. “This side,” he said to me, motioning me to sit at the front left of the *van*, keeping me furthest away from the traffic we were about to plunge into. I leaned back against the pile of posters stacked onto the *van*, my legs dangling beside Mithu’s paddles. Ahsan sat down on the other side of Mithu, having given up the best seat on the platform to me. As the producer’s assistant, he would lead the expedition. “*Cholo, cholo, cholo*,” he called to Liton, our *posterwallah* who came over carrying a container of glue.

At 10:30pm the five of us set off from Kakrail. Mithu put his full weight onto the pedals as we pushed off into the heavy traffic. Our route ran through the main roads of central Dhaka, which would be busy until at least midnight. Skilfully Mithu manoeuvred us out of the path of the long-distance buses raging past and the furiously honking private cars, into the swell of cycle rickshaws that blurred the edges of the main roads after their 10pm curfew had been lifted.

Picking up speed, Mithu cycled us past the central church, home to the Bishop of Dhaka, and the Kakrail Mosque, where all year long Tablighi's from all over the world could be seen hopping across the traffic islands in front of their mosque. Curving along Dhaka's main park we turned right under the Sakura bar, its dark tinted windows concealing the whisky drinkers inside its smoky rooms. We were now on track towards the Bangla-Motor intersection, where our poster-pasting route began.

“Stop, near that tin,” pointed Liton. The ‘tin’ in question was a wall of corrugated iron put up by the Dhaka City Corporation beside the main road. A blue sign announced the City Corporation was working on a new pavement. Stretching a good twenty metres across, the ‘tin’ had been used abundantly by teams just like Liton's. Remnants of posters advertising soft drinks, action movies, IELTS courses, National Children's Day and the Bangladesh Revolutionary Worker's Party decorated most of the tin. All were ripped and torn, parts dissolving into streaks of white paper still stuck to the tin, their coloured surfaces ripped off. The many layers had blended together, constituting a new set of collaged images. The raised fist of a revolutionary worker vanished into the cleavage of a beheaded film actress (figure 1).

HERE FIGURE 1

Liton ran his brush through the pot with glue and held a single sheet poster up against the ribbed surface of the wall. As he smeared the watery glue into it, the paper melted into the curves of the corrugated iron sheets. Mithu handed him a smaller strip of paper announcing the film's release. “More, put more,” said Ahsan from his position on the *van*. Together, Mithu and Liton put up the different designs all along the tin wall, while a crowd gathered along the roadside to watch them. Satisfied with the range of posters, Ahsan motioned Mithu back to the *van-gari*, and we set off again.

Walls between Audiences and Publics

The textures of the walls of Dhaka city change in the moist air and fertile greenery that work upon the concrete surfaces of the city, eating away at it and covering it in shades of green and brown as bits of flora and fauna emerge on its planes and interstices. Over this are papered posters of all sorts. On Dhaka’s walls, posters shared their space with weeds, newspapers, drains, nails holding bunches of banana’s, *dan* boxes to donate bits of money to worthy causes, painted advertisements and many other more or less transient objects.

HERE FIGURE 2

The complex surfaces of densely populated walls have for long been a means to address the many who pass them by every day and night, with notices, advertisements, political slogans, and much else. On many Dhaka streets, newspapers are put up in their entirety. In figure 2, men read the widely circulated and mainstream daily newspaper *Yugantor* that has been put up in a frame on the wall of the Farhatunissa Waqf Estate, which runs a public mosque, madrassa, library and educational centre at this place in Monipuripara, Dhaka. In this neighbourhood associated with its many Christian households, the wall is a boundary into a mix of sacred and secular domains, as well as opening out into the world of media and news through the newspaper and its readers. The figure illustrates how people are accustomed to turn their eyes to the wall and be transported.

Onto such walls *posterwallah* Rokon would paste his posters. “I also do ‘party posters’ [for political parties],” said Rokon, “but it pays less. Cinema money is good.” The pay was good, because the work was of consequence: “It is important, without publicity, films don’t run.” Using the English word ‘publicity’, Rokon highlighted the

clear function of the film posters. As a piece of advertisement the film poster aimed to persuade potential viewers of a film’s worth or interest. This persuasion took the form of visual ingredients associated with the film’s genre. In the action films that dominated the Bangladesh film industry, these were guns and machetes, bloodied faces of prominent film heroes, skimpily dressed actresses or villains laughing insanely (see figure 3). The title of the film (some of its letters substituted by guns or swords), the names of the director, main actors and the production house would feature prominently. As for Bombay films, these “[g]eneric elements are compositionally arranged to reflect the multi-genre look of popular Bombay cinema”¹⁵ and focus on the star.¹⁶ “They can’t read or write, but they recognise a face,” said Rokon. In his account, the posters were designed effectively to visually address and persuade passersby of the nature and worth of the films advertised. They enacted the processes that Preminda Jacob describes as “image transference, from screen-to-street,”¹⁷ and in this way participated in the production of the public culture¹⁸ of the cinema. In Dhaka, the image of the film was projected into the street to draw an audience back into the theatres.

HERE FIGURE 3

But many of those passing by the posters put up by Rokon and his colleagues would not be persuaded by the film posters to enter a theatre. Since the 1980s turn towards fantasy and action cinema, the popular Bangladeshi cinema has lost significant sections of its audience, including many women and middle class

¹⁵ Mazumdar, ‘Bombay Film Poster’, p. 3

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Jacob, *Celluloid Deities*, p. 118.

¹⁸ Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, ‘Why Public Culture’ in *Public Culture* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1999), pp. 5-9.

patrons.¹⁹ Instead, the films have been largely patronised by semi-urban and rural viewers as well as migrant workers in the cities, mostly male, nearly all young and often poor. An important implication of this has been the dwindling of film advertising in newspapers, magazines and on television, in favour of poster advertising. Powerfully announcing the presence of spectators and producers of popular films in the public space of the city, the posters would also encounter a large swathe of reluctant viewers who might refuse, resist or disregard the existence of the films, actors and narratives that the posters tried to make visually present. Films, their stars and aesthetics, could anticipate many a cold shoulder in the streets of Dhaka.

Considering the ubiquity of urban media such as the film poster, however, a purposively elsewhere-directed glance could only be achieved with the most strenuous concentration, as from everywhere posters beckon. Given the very slow circulation of any traveller around this city so terminally grid-locked with traffic jams, posters beckon through the windows of cars or to rickshaws stalled or creeping through Dhaka’s avenues and alleys. But even at higher speeds, the city has a means to make visible the poster on its walls. As Roxanne Varsi’s account of the surfaces of Teheran suggests, “The place of the city is like the flicker of a movie-projector where in the moment of viewing, the image has disappeared.”²⁰ However, she adds that “at the same time, once something is seen, even if only for a second, it has the power to inhabit the mind.”²¹ The wild titles, gory and sexy images, and abundant colours of popular film posters could lodge themselves into the minds even of reluctant city dwellers. This is evident from the voluble rejection, the prolific name-calling, the

¹⁹ Raju, *Bangladesh Cinema*; Gitiara Nasreen and Fahmidul Haq, *Bangladesher Chalochchitra Shilpo: Sangkote Janosangskriti* (Dhaka: Shrabon Prokashoni, 2008).

²⁰ Roxanne Varsi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Teheran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*

outrageous joking, as well as camp and commercial reclamations, and much unfeigned apathy, for the popular cinema, by exactly those who disdainfully proclaim not to be its audience, as I have described elsewhere.²² Such vociferous rejection of the popular cinema by its detractors, including art filmmakers, middle class audiences, government officers and many others, illustrates that they are subject to the imagery of the cinema and have a relationship to it. As passers-by and onlookers, the urban citizenry is everywhere addressed by the imagery of the film industry. Warner suggests attention is required for the constitution of a public, but it may be “mere attention”²³: a bored wandering eye, a disavowed interest or desire, or the inevitability of the endless repetition of the generic aesthetic qualities of the poster all suggest a certain measure of “uptake.”²⁴ Large parts of the urban populace are in this way constituted as the film industry’s public, even in the mere brushing of a distracted gaze of an unwilling commuter stuck in a jam for hours beside the walls of Airport Road. Walking, sitting on a bus, on a bike, or being driven in a car, commuters will see the film posters put up at night by the *posterwallahs*. Even if popular cinema is often used to underscore the differences between the uncivil mass that watches popular cinema (“rickshaw-wallah cinema”) and the sophisticated public that does not,²⁵ the dense, ever-present cinematic imagery on posterred walls reach a vast number of people, inviting all to be an “*imaginary component of [its] fictional field*.”²⁶ It is at this very point that the bright imagery of the cinema (see below)

²² Lotte Hoek, *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

²³ Michael Warner, ‘Publics and Counterpublics’, p. 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 61.

²⁵ See also S.V. Srinivas, ‘Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?’ *Framework* Vol. 42 (2000, summer) [www.framework-online.com/Issue42/42svs.html, accessed 14 Dec. 2010].

²⁶ Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*, (Delhi: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 135.

interpellates the urban commuters not as citizenry but as a crowd.²⁷ The very disdain for cinema’s affective pull and the continuous reiteration that this is someone else’s aesthetic form and pleasure, highlights the extent to which the poster effectively reaches and engages the bodies and minds of those that pass before it. Here what Mazzarella terms the “*open edge* of mass publicity”²⁸ does not threaten to include unsuitable others into the public called into being, but rather to unwillingly make me a subject of its address alongside those others.

The presence of the cinema on the walls and within the field of vision of the most reluctant passers-by suggests the contours of a large cinematic public that much exceeds the boundaries of the audience for films. The way in which the cinema shapes the experience of the city in South Asia and becomes embedded within our sensorium can therefore be less reliant on the narrative text, or even the event and experience of its screening in cinema halls or TV screens, and more embedded within film’s ephemera such as posters, snippets of songs, vague gossip, all glimpsed and distantly heard rather than dedicatedly viewed and listened to. Such a view massively expands the way in which we can understand the public of the popular cinema (in Dhaka and elsewhere in South Asia). It is cinema’s ephemeral forms that allow for its persistence in shaping experience in South Asia.

Of course it isn’t only swords and cleavages that adorn Dhaka’s walls. Dhaka’s commuters are mobilized by myriad images, colours and slogans speaking from its walls. On walls antithetical groups, concepts and products come to occupy the same site, opening out rival or antithetical worlds in adjacent spaces and within

²⁷ Nusrat Chowdhury, “‘Picture-Thinking’: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Bangladesh” *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol. 87, No. 4 (2014), pp. 1257-1278; William Mazzarella, ‘The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who’s Afraid of the Crowd?’ *Critical Enquiry* Vol. 36, No. 4 (2010), pp. 697-727.

²⁸ Mazzarella, *Censorium*, p. 37 (my emphasis).

the frame of the wall. They display the conviviality of Awami League and Bangladesh National Party posters, put up for different purposes by the same *posterwallahs*. They mobilize the wall as a screen, a space of projection and communication for advertisers and activists.

Walls are not, however, transparent screens, allowing projection and communication without interference or static. The mass of rock, paper, and organic matter that constitutes the *posterwallah*'s wall is not inert. As the plants and fungi grow and dissipate along the walls, so do the posters. Put up, torn down, washed off, covered over or peeled, the wallpaper of the city is alive. The city's walls are a continually changing set of backdrops, its colours transformed, a moving design, changing like the fields and forests that frame the villages of Bangladesh. The rapid disintegration of posters and other objects and messages on city walls produces a palimpsest out of the quotidian “ruination” of wall surfaces.²⁹

The wall's ruination underscores how the material specificity of the wall delimits how imagery and ideas appearing within it move.³⁰ The wall creates significant interference in the “screen-to-street” image transference process Jacob describes.³¹ In ruined posters the narrative framing of the poster's imagery loosened or undone. As posters rip and dissolve, its imagery disperses along the wall, becomes collaged in a mural montage. Now gently loosened from the tight narrative framing of the individual poster, the film imagery blended into the wall produces an aesthetic atmosphere of the cinema in the city. With the resurgence of the medium, the sign itself becomes secondary to it, liable to be joined to other projects beyond the control

²⁹ Yael Navaro-Yashin, ‘Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge’ in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 15, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-18; Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, in *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 23, No. 2 (2008), pp. 191-219.

³⁰ See Larkin, *Signal and Noise*.

³¹ Jacob, *Celluloid Deities*.

of film producers or advertisers. In their continual transformations, the walls are productive of entirely unpredictable and unstable articulations. Here “*forests of gestures* are manifest in the streets, their movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movement be circumscribed in a text. ... it constitutes a ‘wandering of the semantic’.”³² In such wandering the poster’s imagery is loosened from the particularities of the film that the poster advertises, to indicate more broadly ‘cinema.’ Within the dense visual layers of the wall, cinema is positioned alongside, and mingled with, other generalities like politics, commerce, education or travel. It is this ‘cinema in general’ (rather than *a* film in particular) that the poster on the wall makes present to a cinematic public that is not the film’s audience.

Sonargoan Roundabout to Farmgate



I gripped the wooden platform as Mithu cycled straight across a massive roundabout. It was now 11pm and the volume of traffic had eased enough for the still abundant vehicles to pick up speed on the wide avenues intersecting outside the Pan Pacific hotel. Mithu pulled us resolutely through the intersection, stopping in front of a short piece of wall bordering the Bank Asia offices. The bank stood opposite the headquarters of the much-maligned WASA, mismanaging the city’s water supplies with great regularity. Further along newspaper journalists smoked and chatted in the tea stalls adjoining their office buildings.

The Bank Asia wall was covered in poster debris. Here and there the title and images of ripped *Khoj – the Search* posters were visible. “You already did this route?” I asked. “Last week,” said Liton. “What happened?” I asked, looking at the defaced posters. “You can’t do it just once,” explained Liton, “you have to come back three,

³² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 102.

four times.” He explained that the posters get ripped off or other posters get pasted on top. “Most posters only last one day,” he laughed at my disbelief, “you’ll only be able to see these ones tomorrow morning!” I made a mental note to check the next days whether this could really be true. With a quick stroke Liton pasted a new poster over the wreckage of the old. “Do you also put your posters on those of others?” I asked. “Sure,” said Liton, “but the posters of films that are still running we leave alone.” He pointed to a poster along the little wall. “*Ma Amar Jaan*,” he read the title, “That’s still running.” Mithu put a *Khoj-the Search* poster neatly next to it.

“Is it a good film?” asked someone in the group of men who had gathered around the *van*, watching the activities with apparent fascination. “What’s it about?” wondered another. “Who’s that actress?” “When is it out?” “Can I have a poster?” “Bhaya, won’t you give me a poster” “Is it an English movie?” “Give me a poster, bhai.” “Is she the producer of the film?” “Bhai, give me *two* posters!” Finally Ahsan spun around and challenged the more persistent among them. “Will you put something in your home, that’s meant for the street?!” he asked rhetorically [*ghore lagaben, rastay lagonar jinish?*]. The embarrassing implication of Ahsan’s challenge or the severity with which it was fielded, made the group retreat. Mithu pulled us out of the crowd and we resumed our journey to find more walls in the direction of Farmgate. “Why don’t you just give them the posters,” asked Paul. Ahsan looked at him dismissively: “They’ll just throw them away, it’s our loss.”

I asked Liton about the work of the *posterwallah*. He told me the work is better paid now than it was when he first started 8 years ago, but that the work is more difficult today. “Why is that?” I asked him. “There are less walls in Dhaka,” he replied. “Less walls?” I thought to myself, “How can that be?” Liton continued: “Dhaka has changed so much, there are so many big buildings, where you cannot put

up any posters” [*boro building yekhane kono poster lagate pare na*]. More apartment blocks and office towers meant less walls, more notices forbidding the pasting of bills. “It is very difficult to find walls in Dhaka today. It is not like it was before.”

We reached Farmgate at 11:54pm. Mithu slowed the *van* into the throbbing traffic. Night and day, Farmgate was alive. The market cum bus station cum intersection cum commercial centre cum school district cum government area cum park is a central point in Dhaka. “Gabtoli, Gabtoli, Gabtoli,” the ticket-collectors cried out their destinations, hanging from the busses that pushed past each other, coming in and out of the lay-by on the far side. A handcart loaded with long bamboo poles was pushed precariously through the Farmgate traffic. The area was given its contours by the numerous traffic islands aimed to separate out the traffic coming from three major roads onto Farmgate. Each of these islands in the whirling stream of vehicles was settled with salesmen selling shoes, lottery tickets, snacks, underwear and plastic goods from sheets spread out on the ground. In the Green Road estuary, rickshaws, CNGs and tempo’s waited for custom, keeping out of the way of the heavy buses that ruled the streets. But even the buses waited as a large flock of buffalo’s ambled past, their barefoot drivers guiding them to their final destination at the Kawran Bazar market, further along the road. The many restaurants on Farmgate were supplied by this large kitchen market, and like the market, stayed open around the clock. Hot breads were lifted from the *tandoors* on the Farmgate pavements while steaming plates of *biriani* were pulled up from deep inside the round cauldrons wrapped with red cloths. The homeless, the *heroinci*’s and the street children rubbed shoulders with the businessmen, the police-officers and professionals on their way home. High above all this activity, a blue neon sign shone from the roof of the massive cinema hall that for decades had defined the area: *Anondo* [Pleasure].

Mithu braked at the corner of the *Anondo* cinema hall, underneath one of the ‘overbridges’. Within seconds we had attracted a good crowd. Unperturbed, Liton climbed up the protective pavement railings and leaned into the large cement pillar that kept up the overbridge. Posters were attached to every bit of its surface. Advertisements of all sorts had formed a thick layer of paper wrapping around the pillar and to this Liton added another layer of sedimentation as he pasted *Khoj-The Search* posters in a ribbon around its circumference. Mithu darted through oncoming traffic and reached the road divider. He clambered through the barbed wire and put up a set of posters on the middle pillar of the overbridge.

Liton’s acrobatics swelled the crowd around our *van*. We had now been joined by a friend of ours, Tanvir, whose particular skills at late night urban travel we’d enlisted for the remainder of our journey. His key talent was talking his way out of rickshaw robberies and hold ups. Over 6 feet tall and handsome, the crowd immediately decided Tanvir was the hero of *Khoj-The Search*. “Hero, hero,” the whispers flew, as Tanvir lit another Benson. Combined with my whiteness and Paul’s camera, the arrival of the police was inevitable. “Is he the hero?” the uniformed man asked Paul. Ahsan looked on annoyed, the arrival of the police could only spell trouble. The policeman commanded a poster. Without hesitation, Ahsan handed him one. Folding out the flimsy paper, the officer held up the poster, looking serious as he inspected its imagery. “You’re the director of the film,” he informed me, “but you shouldn’t be out at this time of night.” Members of the assembled audience now leaned in to follow the new twist to this action plot. Irritated, the policeman hollered at them. A car, trying to turn the corner around our cycle honked at the crowd. Further agitated, the policeman now shouted at Ahsan to move along. Dashing back through the traffic, Mithu pushed the *van* into movement and told us to jump on. Gathering

speed, the *van* swirled past the shoe vendors, turning left towards Indira Road. In the relatively peaceful one-way street flanked by tall leafy trees, we waited for Liton to catch up.

The city in flux

Ahsan invoked the distinction between the street and the home in a rhetorical move to embarrass the men who bothered him in his work. The separation between the inside and outside has been used in a number of ways to explain urban practices in South Asia.³³ For Ahsan, the distinction was clear: you don’t put things in your home that are meant for the street. The opposition between the home and the street was one of three dichotomies that appeared in my conversations with the *posterwallahs*, alongside the distinctions between day and night, and now and then. While the latter were temporal and referred to the continuing changing nature of the city, the former was spatial and suggested where domesticity and sociality could emerge within that rush of change.

“Working at night is wonderful.” Rokon explained the pleasures of the nighttime city. “The night is quiet [*niribili*], while daytime brings nuisance and agitation [*genjam, jontrona*].” Using the word *niribili*, literally meaning solitary, Rokon set off the agitating daytime crowd from the peaceful solitude of the city at night. “At night, there are no cars, it is solitary, the [street] lights are on, it is very nice.” Even Farmgate would quiet down a bit after midnight, as the city’s appearance oscillated between its two faces: daytime and nighttime. Despite the dense traffic and

³³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Public Space in Calcutta’ in *Public Culture* Vol. 10, No. 1 (1997), pp. 83-113; Mahua Sarkar, *Visible histories, disappearing women: producing Muslim womanhood in late colonial Bengal* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008)

its associated noise, and the intense use of the streets and pavements during the daytime, at night the city would become surprisingly quiet. This clear opposition between day and night structured Rokon’s work. “We just can’t put anything up during the day, too much *genjam*.” The *posterwallahs* were forced to work at night, requiring a measure of solitude.

“Before we could paste during the day but now we can’t.” I asked since when they worked at night. Rokon counted: “about 10, 12 years we now work at night.” Like Liton, Rokon juxtaposed the city of now (*ekhon*) with the city of before (*age*). *Before* there were more walls, *now* they were more difficult to find. *Before* they could work during the day, *now* they had to work at night. A notion of a previous and disappeared city was invoked to describe and make sense of the contemporary city. While the opposition between day and night framed the city in a cyclical time-frame, before/now structured the city along a linear temporal axis. In places, this ‘before’ city was still tangibly present. The names of roads and buildings indicated the changing political, sociological or cultural shape of the city: Airport Road ran past the Airport once upon a time, before the new airport was built further out of town and eventually swallowed by the ever-expanding city. While there were some urban sites with a certain historical resonance (such as the Mughal Lalbagh Fort, the colonial Curzon Hall, the Parliament), the ‘before’ city was largely spectral, as it had been built over and pulled down. This ‘before’ was a shapeless reference against which the contemporary city could come into relief. Undefined, the ‘before’ city haunted the ‘now’ city in the various forms of nostalgia that coloured contemporary evaluations of the city. Both the cyclical change in day and night and historical transformations impacted how *posterwallahs* worked. The city’s sights, sounds, smells and tastes were similarly transformed over time, both within the 24 hours of a day, and in the lifetime

of the city. The city continually renewed itself alongside the film posters that announced the next new thing. The lifecycle of the poster, put up, covered over, torn down and put up yet again, played out alongside the continuous transformation of the city. The two processes were linked and both accentuated the city as a space of flux and newness.

“I do this part time,” Rokon said, “We paste posters about 2 or 3 days a week.” The film posters amounted to about eight nights of work per month for Rokon. “I also have a tea stall near Jamuna Films.” Ranging from a small fire with a kettle and a few chipped Shinepukur cups, to more elaborate bamboo or wooden structures, the tea stall is the quintessential Dhaka street site. From quick refreshments to lengthy *addas*, the tea stall provides a space of urban leisure and conviviality for the majority of the city’s men. While women often run tea stalls, late into the night, only in upper middle class areas such as Dhanmondi or around Dhaka University, did women constitute any real part of the clientele for these tea stalls.

On the smaller streets of the Kakrail area, Rokon’s two jobs had certain points of contact. The wall along which his tea stall was positioned would carry the posters of recent films. “*Rickshawwallahs* come to have a cup of tea, do some research watching the poster, asking who the actors are, discuss the film,” he explained, “Not everyone follows it. But garments [workers] ask about the films when they walk home.” The many young women who walk along the city’s streets to and from work in garments’ factories (collectively addressed metonymically as the object they manufactured) would pass innumerable tea stalls, each morning and evening.³⁴ Rokon saw them come by daily and considered them the audience of the films. The posters on the city walls constituted a talking point for those traversing the streets and in this

³⁴ Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

way the posters contributed to the tea stall as a space of urban sociality and conviviality. The perpetual newness of the film poster provided a means to engage one another within the flux of the churning city.

“And when you are putting up the posters, do people come up to you? I asked Rokon. “Yes, they do,” said Rokon, “they ask if the film is good and about the story.” Remembering Ahsan’s outburst, I asked whether Rokon would give any posters away. “We have to give them posters, otherwise they just rip them off the walls.” Clearly, these passers-by were not bothered by the nature of the poster as a ‘street thing.’ In the context of the tea stall too, the posters became wallpaper and highlighted not so much the distinction between *ghor* (home) and *rasta* (street), but produced conviviality in the domain of the street. In the flows of movement of people passing through the continually changing city, the newness of the film posters provided a site of sociality. The tea stall wall provided a certain intimacy at the intersection of the cyclical changes in the city and the ever-new posters announcing cinema’s latest sights.

Indira Road to Bijoy Sarani



As we left Farmgate behind us, the quiet of the midnight city slowly became palpable. The shutters on the shops were down, tarpaulins covered the fruit stands. “Stop there on the left,” said Liton to Mithu. Ahsan objected: “Not there, that’s a mosque. Stop further ahead.” “That’s not a mosque,” said Liton. “Look there,” replied Ahsan, pointing up. We all looked up. “It’s only a mosque on the first floor,” tried Liton, ready to paste on the wall underneath the purported mosque. “Keep going,” Ahsan instructed Mithu.

Mithu cycled along the dark shops to the next intersection. There he pulled the *van* to the side. On the other side of the road, a clinic stood inside a narrow garden, marked off by a boundary wall. The wall was covered in remnants of posters and painted advertisements, recently scrubbed from its surface, leaving stray letters and colours across the wall. Liton and Mithu set off across the street with a role of posters and two buckets, while we waited with Ahsan.

We heard the shouting behind us. A young boy cried out. From near Farmgate, a group of about ten boys came running our way. They looked in their early teens, maybe ten to fourteen. One of the bigger boys caught up with a smaller boy running ahead. He grabbed his arm and drew him down to the ground. The boy screamed, falling down. The bigger one brought down a stick on the smaller boy's back. He cried out again. As the other boys stood around, shouting, the child was viciously beaten. The bigger boy enacted his clear sovereignty over the group. For the first time that evening, I was rattled. Crying, the smaller boy eventually got away, screaming angrily as he ran towards the nearest side street. The chilling scene before us resembled in everything the stock flash-back of the Bangladeshi action film, in which the backstory of the hero shows a young boy arriving in the city to end up on Dhaka's streets, where he overcomes the odds to become a (largely extra-legal) force of justice for the repressed. The popular action flicks thematised the city's devouring inequalities, its impunity and the violence that its poor young men regularly confronted.

Turning at the next roundabout, Mithu cycled calmly onto the very empty avenue that ran past the Parliament Building. It was now 12:30am. From here he would follow this one road, cycling in a straight line all the way until he reached the Mirpur 11 suburb at dawn. Magnificent *krishnachura* trees flanked one side of the

street. Behind the flowering trees, the angular shapes of Louis Kahn’s Parliament complex were lit up in yellow sodium lights. Opposite, the entrance gates to the residential Monipuripara area were closed. The street in between was calm and peaceful. Once again we were stopped by the police on account of my presence. “You’d better be careful around here,” said the policeman to me, “it is dangerous at night.” His duty to warn fulfilled, he let us get on with our journey.

The tea stalls along the walls of Monipuripara had shut for the night. It was nearing 1am. The portions of wall right beside the stalls were covered in all sorts of posters. The *Khoj-The Search* poster was still there from another round made by another team of *posterwallahs*. Mithu cycled on slowly. “How do you know where to paste the posters?” I asked Liton who sat on the other side of the *van*. “We know where people stop and watch,” said Liton, “We know exactly what happens when we paste where.” “What does that mean,” I asked. “We know where the busses turn, where people will have time to watch the posters,” he said, explaining the ebbs and flows of the vast human circulation through the city. “Gulistan roundabout has this very beautiful high up wall,” he continued, “You can put posters up there right from the top to the bottom.” As the bus-station for long-distance buses to the South, Gulistan was the arrival and departure point for many migrants and travellers between Dhaka and the countryside. I asked where else was good in the city for posters. “We start with the production offices,” said Liton, “so that the booking agents can see the posters.” Booking agents were the link between film production houses and the theatres, booking new films for cinema hall proprietors. “Second, we go around to the newspaper offices, so that the journalists will give the film some publicity.” After these key sites, the posters were distributed by nighttime routes like the one we were

on. At each point different routes of circulation intersected, making the poster meet the eyes that moved through the city space.

“What about that wall?” I pointed to a long white wall, 2 meters high and clear of any advertisements or posters. “That isn’t a wall,” said Liton. “What? Why?” I asked, “it’s a perfect wall!” “It isn’t a wall, it is the cantonment,” explained Liton. Behind the wall was the runway of the old Dhaka airport, now in use by the Bangladesh Air Force (‘A Great Way of Life’ announced the English title over the entrance to the base). The pristine white wall could not be used as advertisement space. This wall was not a wall.

Urban Viewing: Density and Intensity

The rounds of the *posterwallahs* through the city opened up some of its walls, animating the city’s surfaces. Their activities echoed in the life-cycle of the poster, never inert, always changing, as the fragile paper disintegrated and a continually changing collage of imagery spoke from the walls. “We do four nights for one film,” said Rokon, “We then do the same route twice. Most of these posters stay only for one day. If they last longer, they may stay for maximum seven days.” I had been checking the route I took with Liton and it was true, the poster we had put up on the walls of Monipuripara had only lasted one day, before being ripped, torn or covered over. On the Farmgate overbridge, however, the posters had held out for a few more days. Only once I started to pay attention to the posters, I realised how quickly the surfaces of the walls changed.

I wondered whether such high turnover could really be sufficient for the needs of the film producer. “One day of publicity is enough,” said Rokon, “the poster is the number one strength [*shokti*] for advertising films.” Second to this came the rickshaws

and *van-gari*’s that would be loaded with posters and speakers, travelling around to advertise a film. While in the suburbs, small towns and villages, this was a very effective manner of attracting audiences, in the mega-city of Dhaka, the producers relied entirely on the poster to do the work. “*Bhodrolok* don’t watch films so putting advertisements in the paper is not of any use,” Rokon diagnosed the need for the street poster, “Garments go and see films. I like to watch films.” This sociological account of film’s key audiences generated its advertising strategies. “When a film is released on Friday, you won’t know it without a poster. People look at posters and listen.” Seeing the poster on the street and hearing others chat about films was the best way to generate publicity and spectators.

With films reliant on the street poster to gather its audience, the *posterwallah*’s activities were organised through a set of theories about urban viewing. These combined an understanding of the morphology of the city and the nature of film imagery as related to circulation, density and intensity. “I’ve been doing this for 16 years,” Rokon invoked the before city to express its present condition, “Before it was 16, 18, 20 pieces [sheets making up one poster]. Now it is only 4 sheets.” The four-sheeters were the largest posters going in Dhaka. “The big ones, we put at Shyamoli, Gulistan, Sydabad, Sadorghat, Azimpur, Bongopara. There are big walls there.” Rokon described the nine main routes through the city that *posterwallahs* used. Combined they covered all of Dhaka. “The best places for posters are, first, Gulistan, then Kakrail, Polton, Gulistan *overfly*, Sodorghat and Gabtoli.” These routes intersected directly with patterns of circulation of people through the intensely dense areas of Dhaka. Posters here, repeatedly pasted, would yield the highest visibility for the posters. They could be considered ‘dense viewing sites.’

Lakshmi Srinivas, in her general account of cinema halls in Bangalore, has pointed out that there is a “correspondence between ‘catchment areas’ and certain parts of the city [which] finds visual expression in the posters and billboards that publicize the films.”³⁵ This is not the case in Dhaka, where producers rather than exhibitors do the bulk of advertising, in a city that is both incredibly densely populated and largely monolingual. Film producers don’t know exactly where their audiences will be but know that they will be moving around, often slowly. They rely on circulation as a vector of film visibility and publicity. While cinema hall owners may advertise a film in their neighbourhood, Dhaka’s *posterwallahs* know visibility depends on circulation, on the inevitably dense paths of movement of approximately 15 million Dhakaites³⁶ making their way through the city.

Like Liton, Rokon named Gulistan as the best place for posters. “Getting down at Gulistan [bus station], it will immediately catch people’s eye.” He said *loker chokhe pore*, which means ‘falling on people’s eyes,’ highlighting its affective and inevitable force. Rokon combined the inevitability of being caught by the poster, with its impact on the eyes. “When you get down at Gabtoli [bus station] you see posters on the wall that you can’t get in the village. Dazzling, an amazing thing!” [*Jholok, obhak jinish!*]. The poster was radiant in Rokon’s recounting, flashing out from the enormous walls of the large bus stations in the city. Here, not only daily commuters from outlying Gazipur or Narayanganj came off the busses, but a constant flow of travellers and migrants between the villages and the city would enter Dhaka through these gateways. “In villages the posters are only in the bazaar, not along the roads as

³⁵ Lakshmi Srinivas, ‘Cinema halls, locality and urban life’ in *Ethnography* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010), p. 196.

³⁶ United Nations Statistics Division, *World Statistics Pocketbook, 2015 edition*, Series V, No. 39 (2015).

in Dhaka.” Posters participated in maintaining these distinct rural and urban economies of viewing.

In Rokon’s account, the urban space was animated by the ‘dazzling flash’ of the film poster imagery that would fall upon the eyes and burn itself into the senses of those arriving in and travelling through the city. It was the bright intensity of the poster, its *jholok* nature, that made it efficacious in being seen. The luminous imagery, capable of assaulting the eye, draws citizens into the crowd as passers-by are viscerally engaged through cinema’s attacked on the body.³⁷ Radiant, the poster unsettles the solemnity of the wall and opens up its potential to guide the viewing passer-by into the visual forms of the cinema. The speed of its turnover maintains its newness, and the material effects of its placing within the medium of the wall, and its resulting ruination, disperses this intense imagery into a decontextualized, self-referencing presence that goes much beyond the particularities of the film it advertised. Along this continuously transformed palimpsest of images a vast urban public moves, apprehending this continually newness that remains a key experience of the city. At dense viewing sites, radiant imagery made the cinema a visceral presence in the city and for its population.

But there was a limit to the power of visual intensity and circulatory density. The bright excitement of the posters, blazing across the eyes of the many who would pass them by, could not do its work in all urban locations. I told Rokon about the discussion between Liton and Ahsan at the mosque. “We don’t put posters up in front of a mosque,” confirmed Rokon, “because if people see a poster their prayers will be spoiled [*namaj noshto hobe*]. It isn’t allowed, and we also don’t do it.” Again, the intensity of the poster’s imagery was thought to reach out and have an effect even on

³⁷ Mazzearella, *Censorium*; Chowdhury, ‘Picture-Thinking’.

accidental viewers. This made the poster inappropriate to certain places. Rokon recited: “Not on the Secretariat, Shongshod Bhobon [Parliament], Bongo Bhobon [presidential residence], PM office, the cantonment, not in front of graveyards, churches and temples.” The spaces of sacred and secular authority were off limits for the *posterwallahs*. These were ‘thin’ viewing places, inimical to non-authorised imagery. They proclaimed visually their incontestable authority. The cantonment would therefore not serve as a surface for the dazzling appeal of the film poster. It was inimical to its intense visuality and the presence of cinema, and the fantasies of sex, violence and justice that it contained. Without the capacity to mediate this visual world, this wall was not truly a wall in the eyes of the *posterwallah*.

Agargao Onwards



We crossed Bijoy Sarani. The pavement here was separated from a park behind it by a low wire fence. Inside the park was the tomb of General Ziaur Rahman. On the pavement this side of the wire men in *lungi*’s sauntered along. Some went up to the fence, and negotiated with the sex workers waiting for custom on the other side. It was the last stretch of living city before the emptiness of the Agargao area.

“You’d better go home,” said Ahsan as we started to cross over into Agargao, “this is where all the CNG crime happens.” The newspapers regularly carried gruesome stories about nighttime attacks from drive-by CNGs. “Aren’t you worried about it?” I asked Ahsan. “We left everything at the office,” he replied. They carried no wallets, watches, mobiles or other valuables; only the clothes on their back and a few taka for tea and breakfast at the end of the night. “This way we can’t be robbed.” I asked whether anything had ever happened. “I was robbed on one round once,” said Ahsan, “that’s when I learnt. I had a mobile with me that my uncle in Saudi Arabia

had given me. It was stolen. Gifts are hard to loose.” “*Maya*,” nodded Tanvir, “you were attached to it.”

“Eh *kali* [empty],” Paul waved at a stationary CNG, waiting for late-night customers. We climbed in and said goodbye to Mithu, Liton and Ahsan, who set off towards Mirpur 11. Our CNG sped in the opposite direction, at a velocity rarely reached on the busy daytime avenues. We flew back along the road. The CNG stopped in front of the barricades closing off a new link road due to be opened by the Prime Minister. Underneath a stairwell leading up into a market, a long table had been set up next to a tea stall. “Best *roti* anywhere in the city at this time of night,” said Paul, as we sat down on the wooden bench. The make-shift shop only opened after midnight and catered to night guards, *rickshawwallahs* on the nightshift, street kids hoping for a meal, farmers coming into Kawran Bazar from outside the city, and other night dwellers. On the other side of the road men gathered in queues on the pavement. The city corporation was fixing up the road and those lined up hoped for a night’s manual labour. While they waited, we ate and entertained the assembled company with our *posterwallah* adventures. It was almost 2am.

Film Posters on City Walls

How does the cinema inhabit the city and shape its experience? In this article, I have taken the perspective of the young men who work at night to put film posters on the walls of Dhaka city to engage this question. Their work is positioned at the intersection of the surface of the wall, the film poster and the crowds that circulate along them. The *posterwallahs*’ activities allow a rethinking of how these three come together.

For Dhaka’s *afficheurs*, the wall is a medium, a means by which the cinema can be made present in the city. They follow the lines of the walls through the city, strategically papering its surfaces. Their ideas of the morphology and mobility of the city, shape how and where they work. Their theories of the city take into account its flows and circulations, filtered through distinctions between now and then, night and day, village and city, inside and outside. They combine these ideas of the city’s flows with their understanding of the cinema’s imagery as *jholok*, radiant and intense, to determine which walls can be best mobilized as a medium for the film poster.

As material structures, the walls shape the messages that emerge on their surfaces. Exposed to weather and urban life, the accretions on the surfaces of walls form palimpsests and the image becomes unmoored from its framing within the poster. The wall reconstitutes a frame, in which the cinema image is suspended among other imagery to gesture beyond the particular messages that the posters, slogans and advertisements were designed to impart. It becomes part of a wider visual atmosphere. It makes for a presence of cinema in general, as the details of a film’s specificity fade with the crumbling of the poster. Due to the decreased specificity and the radiant nature of the cinema’s imagery, it can be caught by a glance of a passer-by. Seeing the work of the poster in this way expands its scope, delinking the poster imagery from the individual film text towards cinema more broadly understood as an “aesthetic formation.”³⁸ The cinema here is an aesthetic environment that is dispersed through the city. As a part of the city’s skin, the continuously ‘new’ surface of the wall emerges as a part of the “kinetic media sensorium”³⁹ of the contemporary city.

³⁸ Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁹ Ravi Sundaram, ‘The visceral city and the theatre of fear’ in *Architectural Design* Vol. 77, No. 6 (2007), pp. 30–33.

My articulation of the relations between the film poster, the urban wall and the cinematic public suggests three things. First, to be part of the life world of the cinema you don't need to watch films. The differentiation between the audience for films and the cinematic public provides a means to address the presence and relevance of the cinema also for those genres or industries that are not universally embraced, in places where the cinema inhabits an ambivalent place. This is significant when accounting for the ubiquity and importance of cinema across South Asia. Second, the newness of the cinema and the continuous renewal of the surfaces of the city's walls is significant for how both the cinema (always the next new thing) and the city are experienced (never still, always changing). Through the continually re-affixed posters of ever newer films onto the cities walls, the sense of the newness of each comes to be experienced simultaneously and analogously. The turn-over is barely noticeable, submerged in the constant flux of the city. Third, the very visual language of the popular cinema's aesthetic produces a bright intensity that makes use of 'dense viewing sites' to be efficacious to the extent that it 'burns' the imagery of the popular cinema and its basic tropes (violence, impunity, inequality, desire) onto the retina and conscience of the passer-by, interiorising its imagery as an experience of the city. This makes the cinema constitutive in the sensory experience of the city. The limits to this are felt at 'thin viewing sites', where the wall is not a wall, indexing the inequalities and structures of power that determine the spaces of the cities in and on which the cinema flourishes.

Acknowledgements

For taking me along through the cinema's urban nights and illuminating it, I thank Rokon, Mithu, Liton as well as Tanvir and Paul. The ideas and arguments in this

paper were developed in a long-standing conversation with Ajay Gandhi and following generous comments by Lawrence Cohen. I am grateful to them both.